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FREE

Last Rites: The Duxbury crematorium

Town ranks near
the top in more
ways than one

Part one of two
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What appears to be a small home or maintenance office in the center of the Mayflower Cemetery is really a crematorium. The quaint, house-like appearance of the crematorium disguises it well, except for the smoke vents atop its roof.

In 1979, the trustees who oversaw Mayflower Cemetery decided to build a crematorium as a way to generate additional funds. The trustees had high hopes for the facility.

The first half of the crematorium was up and running in 1980. But the outcome looked bleak as it performed only four cremations that year. But by 1986, after much success and growth in the business, a second section was added. Six years after the crematorium began operating, the annual number of cremations rose to 435 and continued to rise.

Today, the Duxbury crematorium is the largest, by volume, in the state and in the top 5 percent in the coun-

As gas prices increase, so does the cost of cremations. In January, prices were raised from \$190 each to \$230. This price does not include the \$75 medial examiner's fee required by Massachusetts law. Even with the increase, the comparatively low cost of cremations has created a growing demand. The facility performed more than 2,000 cremations last year.

Patricia Pappas is the superintendent of the Mayflower Cemetery and crematorium. "Each person entering the crematorium is treated with dignity and respect," she said. "We treat them as if they were our own loved one."

Pappas, who has been in the funeral business for more than 10 years, knows what a sensitive matter death is, and will accommodate families in any way she can, as long as they follow the regulations of the cemetery. Family members may be present during the cremation of their loved one, however, a funeral director must also be present.

In most cases, cremation must be handled through a funeral home, but Massachusetts law allows families to obtain burial permits, provided they

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follow Massachusetts Department of Health regulations.

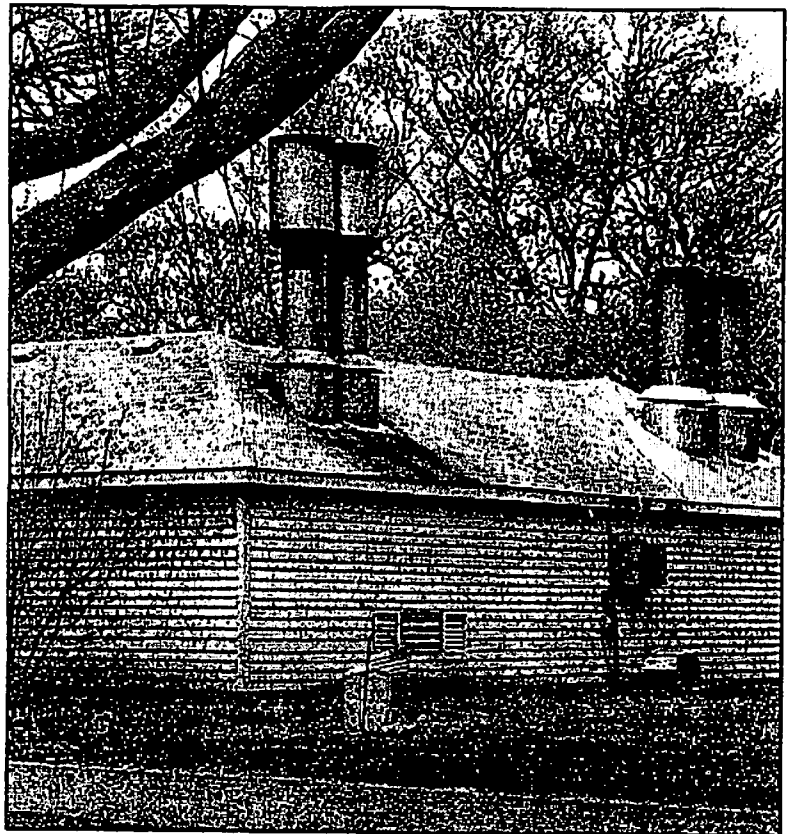
Pappas, who has been superintendent since November 2004, registered the Duxbury crematorium with the Cremation Association of North America to ensure that all technicians become certified in cremation and the facility has a set of guidelines to follow.

The following guidelines are established for both funeral homes and private parties:

Only the next of kin, husband, wife or children, may sign the cremation-authorization form. The deceased must be examined by a medical examiner before being allowed into the crematorium. Massachusetts law requires a 48-hour waiting period before cremation. Once a death certificate and burial permit are obtained, the body must remain in a closed container. The container must be transported onto the grounds in a closed vehicle and remain in the vehicle until all paperwork is processed by the department assistant. If a family is cremating a loved one without the use of a funeral home and they wish to view the cremation, the superintendent of the crematorium must be present in lieu of a funeral director. All jewelry and personal effects to be kept by the family must be removed prior to entering the crematorium.

Due to the combustibility of pacemakers, they must be removed from the body before entering the crematorium. During the cremation process, if a pacemaker is left inside a person, the heat causes the battery to explode inside the oven.

"The explosion often is so loud it can be heard throughout the cemetery," Pappas said. "If the pacemaker is not removed, not only can it damage the equipment, it may also seriously harm a technician if they happen to be checking the process and open the door at the point of combustion."



STAFF PHOTO/WESLEY ENNIS

Last stop – The Duxbury crematorium performed more than 2,000 cremations last year.

The ovens, which are fueled with natural gas, are shut off every night and then started again each morning. Cremation takes place at 1,600 degrees, as regulated by the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency, which is hot enough to burn so thoroughly as to prevent smoke from entering the air.

According to cemetery technician Paul Bruce, "It takes approximately 45 minutes to one hour to heat the oven up to 1,600 degrees each morning, depending on the weather."

After each cremation is completed, the ovens must then be cooled to 400 degrees before it is safe for the technicians to remove the remains.

Bruce, a crematorium technician for four years, who is certified by the Cremation Association of North America, joined the the crematorium

department after losing a finger in an accident at the water department.

"I could no longer tolerate the cold water. I took the job for more money, and it's a lot warmer," Bruce said.

Bruce and one other technician are responsible for running the crematorium. Aside from performing the cremations, they also perform daily maintenance to keep the facility safe and clean, as well as make sure family demands are met.

The crematorium offers 24-hour and 48-hour service; the technicians work their schedules around the priorities of the services.

"We have a good system," Bruce said, noting the technicians are trained to be sensitive; they are not fazed by what they do, but treat their job with respect. "We are sensitive, treat everyone with dignity like they were our own family."



Staff photo/Wesley Enr

Eternal rest – A flag marks a grave in the cemetery, the site of the Duxbury crematorium.

Are we becoming a cremation nation?

Researchers speculate that the growing number of cremations is due in large part to economic inflation. As the cost of living increases, so does the cost of dying. For many, being cremated alleviates the financial burden a funeral can place on their families. The average cost of a funeral with burial is between \$6,000 and \$10,000. The average cost of a cremation through a funeral home is \$1,000 and up, depending on whether you have viewings and memorial services.

A growing concern with a lack of space has also influenced people toward being cremated. In the Duxbury crematory, the numbers have been rising significantly over the years.

Rise of cremations in Duxbury

- 1980 – 4 cremations performed
- 1986 – 435 cremations
- 1991 – 1,085 cremations
- 1996 – 2,100 cremations
- 2001 – 1,968 cremations
- 2005 – 2,859 cremations

In 2000, 621,494 cremations were performed in the United States, accounting for 26 percent of deaths, as recorded by the Cremation Association of North America. In 1980, 10 percent of deaths resulted in cremations, and 17 percent of deaths in 1990. The Cremation Association projects that by the year 2025, more than half of the deaths in the United States will result in cremation.

Patricia Pappas, superintendent of the Mayflower Cemetery, expects that by the end of 2006, more than 3,000 cremations will have been performed in the Duxbury crematorium.



Staff photo/Wesley Ennis

Tricia Pappas checks data on her computer as she works in the office.

Cremation: how it works

If you fear fire, ovens or cremation, consider yourself warned: Descriptive material follows.

The crematorium, which is run in army fashion, is very organized and extremely thorough. Each body entering the cemetery for cremation must be escorted by a hearse and a funeral director. Prior to admittance, the funeral director must check the body in with the department assistant at the front office and have all paperwork filled out. The department assistant then creates an identification disk, similar to a doggy tag, with a code number on it that will remain with the body through all stages of cremation. After it's checked in, the disk and the paperwork are placed with the body in the crematorium and they await their turn.

Once the funeral director has left, the casket may not be opened again. It is policy that the casket may only be opened by a funeral director or medical examiner; at no time is a crematory technician allowed to open the casket. This is done out of respect for the loved one whose body is in the casket.

The first job of the technician is to

check the person in by paperwork and tag. Then he/she will remove any metal from the casket, such as hinges and handles. A body may be cremated in either a pine box, regulated cardboard box – grayish-beige cardboard that looks like a moving box you would hang clothes in – or a wooden or cloth-covered casket. Metal caskets are not allowed in the crematorium.

Once the casket has been prepared for cremation, the body is assigned the code number, which is placed on the cremation oven.

The shiny, metal oven looks like a large pizza oven with an upward-sliding door. It is heated to 1,600 degrees. The casket is then lifted with a riser and is carefully slid into the oven. After the casket is secured in the oven, the technician checks the coding disk one last time, places the disk on the oven to identify which body is in which oven, and closes the door. It takes approximately 2½ hours for the cremation to be completed. When a wooden casket is used, however, the process can take slightly longer.

During the cremation, the techni-

cian will check after an hour by opening the door and assessing the process. This allows the technician to make sure everything is going smoothly, as well as gauge whether more time is needed for the cremation. The ovens are set with a timer, which shuts off automatically after the cremation time is lapsed.

Once the ovens are cooled to 400 degrees – about 1½ hours – the technician then carefully removes the remains and places them into a deep, rectangular, plastic Tupperware-type medical container for the remainder of the cooling process. The identification disk is moved with the remains to the medical container.

After each cremation is complete, the ovens are cleaned thoroughly using a large, heavy, metal-bristled brush. The porcupine-like metal spikes scrub the oven clean and ensure all body fluids have been removed from the ovens before the next body is placed inside.

To ensure the remains are in the purest form, the technicians will use a powerful magnet to remove any metals from them, such as metal im-

plants, staples or bone pins. Any jewelry left to be cremated with the person will have melted into the remains and will be kept with them for eternity.

Many people believe that after cremation, the remains come out as ashes. This, however, is not true. The remains are removed from the ovens in larger pieces that must later be processed into the final ashes that are received by the family. The bones and ashes are pulverized through a metal food processor-like machine that grinds them, leaving only tiny bone fragments. The ashes, when the process is completed, are not smooth like the ashes received on Ash Wednesday, but more grain-like, "like Bermuda sand," Patricia Pappas, superintendent of the crematorium, said.

As the ashes go through the grinding machine, they slide out into the urn. Family members have a choice of paper or plastic bags to contain the ashes inside the urn. Once placed into the urn, the ashes must be checked and recorded by two technicians before they are sealed and released.

Once released from the cemetery,

the remains may be buried, scattered (either in the Mayflower Cemetery scatter gardens or elsewhere), or retained by the family as a keepsake. Be advised that your loved one's remains will not be absorbed into the earth. What are commonly referred to as ashes are mostly bone fragments. Bone fragments cannot be absorbed into the earth, and therefore must be scattered according to state laws. A common myth is that if ashes are scattered prior to a rain storm, they will be absorbed into the earth faster. The truth is, if the ashes are scattered and then it rains, the bone fragments will harden and become cement-like, sitting atop the ground.

If the ashes of a loved one are to be scattered at sea, federal law requires that human ashes must be scattered at least 3 miles out from shore. It is recommended, for safety reasons, that before going out to sea, a harbormaster is notified of the trip.

Cremation is a growing alternative to the traditional burial of deceased. Although your loved ones may chose to be cremated, they can still be given a burial after cremation that would allow them a final resting place that family members can visit.